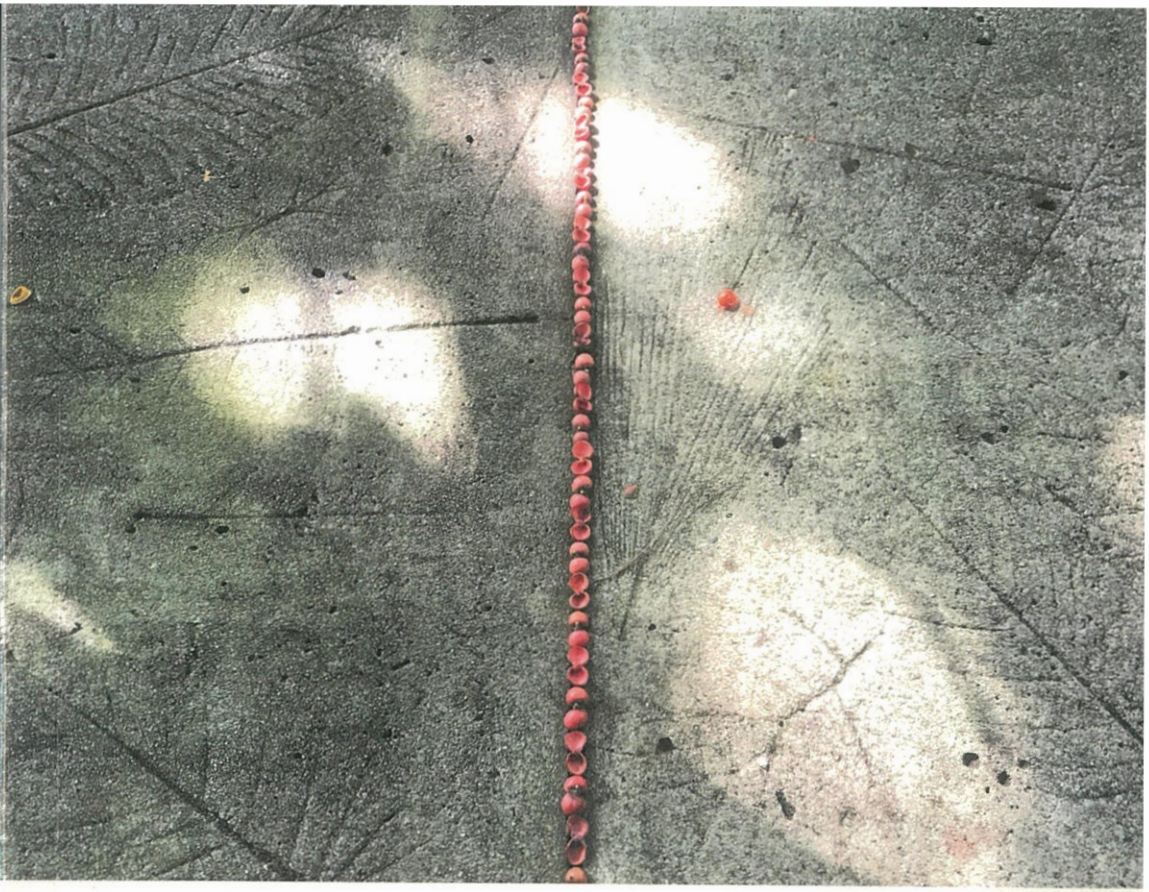

Found Objects in Art Therapy

Materials and Process

Edited by Daniel Wong and Ronald P. M. H. Lay

CHAPTER 1

Materials

Potential and Found Objects

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Found objects, a translation from the French *objets trouvés*, are objects or raw materials with non-art functions that are found by an artist and are used as artwork or made into a part of the artwork with little or no modification. Whether natural or human-made, found objects are used inventively in a work of art in such a way that it calls attention to its raw and base material qualities, in dimension and texturality (Manco 2012; Tate 2019).

The use of found objects in art blurs and asks questions between the reality and nature of art. Artists today work with a range of discarded, pre-used, salvaged items, souvenirs and other ephemera. The attraction often lies in the junk materials' aesthetic, emotional or intellectual appeal, the artist's relationship with the found object, and in the specific roles and functions that the object evokes, in their embedded social or personal history (Brooker 2010; Guruianu and Andrievskikh 2019; Iverson 2007). Whether for their aesthetic quality or lack of, there may be little intervention beyond putting the objects in circulation or in combination with others as assemblages. Other artistic techniques and methods of production include collage, bricolage, installation, sculpture, paintings and photography (Whitely 2011).

This chapter looks into the role and use of found objects in art and therapy, and how our identity and subjectivity is reconstituted and reconstructed in the found object artwork. I begin with André Breton's conception of *objective chance*, its significances and the numerous

iterations and applications of chance encounters in our cultural and art practices today. How we assign value and meanings in our interactions with found objects in art and in therapy, its relationship to the finder and maker in its aesthetics expression and intentions, will be surveyed through the work of clinical psychologist and researcher Paul Camic, along with other writers. I will then touch on Tim Ingold's writings on material thinking, and his conception of making as a process in which different materials unfold their potential. The role of play objects and object play in human evolution and innovation is also examined. In doing so, I will traverse artworks, texts and writings from anthropology, cognitive and evolutionary psychology, contemporary art, cultural studies and art therapy. I will also attempt to link my understanding to a few artists who use found objects to ask questions on their lived experiences, social practices and artistic expressions.

Surrealists' objects

André Breton, the de facto leader of the surrealist groupings of artists and poets, exhorted artists to explore the workings of the mind through philosophic and creative explorations in the intersection between dream and reality. He described surrealism as 'pure psychic automatism' in his 1924 *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Breton 1969 [1924], p.26). As a concept, it encouraged artists to tap into their metaphysical experience to evoke personal psychic responses and fantasies. As a technique, it was soon translated and adopted by major surrealist artists. Various creative techniques were invented through games that rely on chance encounters, psychic automatism or trance writing, exquisite corpse, dream description and the artistic methods of *objets trouvés* and their derivatives such as collage, frottage, decalcomania and grattage (Brotchie and Gooding 1995). The ideas and applications afforded experimentation to artists such as Luis Buñuel, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Joan Miró and Yves Tanguy, who explored the unconscious within guises and symbols, in figurative or abstract representations in sculpture, photography and film (Kelly 2013; Whitely 2011).

Drawing from psychoanalytical theories on the unconscious and its tagging of an object, painting, poem or other artwork, the surrealists sought liberation from rationalism in their explorations of the intangible and the uncanny. They challenged perceptions of reality

and either created objects from the dream world and/or with automatist elements in representations. Think of Salvador Dalí who created 'objects with symbolic function' (Kelly 2013, p.43) from the dream world. The artwork *Object* by Méret Oppenheim is another commonly cited dream object. The disjuncture created by the hairy teacup, between the teacup and fur, became a receptacle 'of fears and longings': 'the spoon was phallic, the cup vaginal, the hair pubic' (Martyris 2016, para.7). Other artists such as André Breton, Alberto Giacometti and Joan Miró were more interested in exploring the deeply personal and the traces that inner desires leave through chance encounters, in 'the eruption of contradiction within the real[ity]' (Aragon 1994 [1926], p.217).

Objective encounter

André Breton placed great value on operations of chance encounter, to marvellous coincidence, as a means of getting to the borders of the conscious mind, describing 'objective chance' as having the ability to place oneself in a state of grace with chance. In this conception, the surrealist objects 'are embodiments of our inner desires' to fulfil 'an existing unconscious obsession' (Mathilde 2015, para.3). When encountered by the finder/viewer, they 'complete a piece of which is missing in their life' (Mathilde 2015, para.7).

The 'marvellous' is related to Sigmund Freud's fetish object and is similar to Jacques Lacan's conception of the elusive object (Iverson 2007; Whitely 2011). The enigmatic encounter with the object in and of itself is epitomized in Breton's book *Nadja*. Breton and the artist Alberto Giacometti would also wander around Parisian flea markets in the hope of being *called* by or chancing on certain items that revealed deeply personal meanings or something unexpected. The marvellous to be found and reclaimed for art is experienced in the everyday Parisian world in their lived encounter with material objects, places and individuals as a series of intense encounters, in alleys, the gardens of the city and the natural world. In some aspects, Breton's found object was thus unique, and irreplaceable: it was at the same time *lost* and *found*, in that 'same interstice of time and space', in the relationship between subjective desires and objective encounters where 'the coincidence resides', between 'active research' and 'a passive alertness', similar to the equal attention in reverie where the 'experience of *objet trouvé*

happens to be' (Müller 2017, para.2). This serendipitous activity is a confrontation between subjectivity and social and material conditions (Kadri, with Fijalkowski and Richardson 2016).

The encounters with the lost object and the engagement set desire in motion in the finder/viewer and evoke a search for significances and identity. The found art/scene captured by my co-editor Ronald P. M. H. Lay's iPhone in Figure 1.1 is an example of an enigmatic encounter. The mesh of gangly steel wires and rods was left behind at a construction site at the back of a building along Orchard Road, Singapore, renowned for its luxurious stretch of high-end retail shopping. Looking at the image one late evening together, when we were pre-selecting a cover image, we could not help reflecting on the effects of this common industrial material, which was responsible for much of the world's rapid industrialization. The encounter jolted us and we paused to reconsider the speed of urban renewal projects in Singapore and the relation between runaway consumption, waste and the status of second-hand goods.

Figure 1.1. *Extraction: The Stage before Reintegration*
[digital photograph, Ronald P. M. H. Lay, 2014]

The surprising encounter called the attention of the viewer and finder to question the connection between external nature, everyday

perception and senses, which is not only located in our unconscious but also between what are strange, novel and familiar experiences. The lively engagement with the photograph set into play the artist in both of us. It engaged our senses, imagination and discovery with what we may have become alienated from, through associations, and opened us to other dimensions of our psyche and subjectivities, of identity, memory, otherness, potential trauma and loss that is embedded in the contemporary world in which we live (Iverson 2004).

Identity and memory: Working with the lost and found

What we choose to attend to and how we fashion or reconstitute the altered forms can play a role in defining and recreating our sense of identity (Bat-Or and Megides 2016; Brooker 2010; Camic, Brooker and Neal 2011; Weedon 2016). Found objects provide therapeutic metaphors for us to work with the rejected and lost parts of self in concrete and tangible terms (Siano 2016). Whether found or repurposed, objects become vessels for projections of childhood fantasies or the tender memories and nostalgic longing of adults (Whitely 2011). In her interview for *VERVE* magazine in July 2015 on whether the art materials were found or, in hindsight, selected, the artist Anita Dube said:

> You already have inside you an emotional climate as well as an ideational climate, which is why you select a particular object. You may have crossed that same object a year ago with no resonance at all because you were not in the place where it makes perfect sense. We only see and receive when we are ready to, and then, the found object magically appears. (quoted in Baswani 2017, para.9)

In *The Afterlife of Discarded Objects: Memory and Forgetting in a Culture of Waste*, Andrei Guruianu and Natalia Andrievskikh (2019) interrogated and scrutinized collected stories, photographs, collectibles, heirlooms and keepsakes from contributors who have artefacts from a specific historical period in Eastern Europe. They detailed how the objects are reimagined and made relevant through personal and social narratives and cultural conceptualization. This creative action and engagement with the ephemera and materiality plays a crucial role in constituting memory and identity. Discarded items are coloured by nostalgia and wishful thinking; they may be representations of what

is wasted, longed for and aestheticized, existing at the intersection of individual and collective consciousness. Guruianu and Andrievskikh (2019) wrote:

> The moment when we decided to keep a used train ticket or postcard instead of throwing it away, or an old favourite chipped plate reimagined as a coin dish, we invest it with sentimental value that replaces its expired functionality. (p.3)

We insert into our narratives of the found, the discarded and the second hand aspects of our personality, gender and class, ethnicity and culture, our sense of home, age and stage in life (Davis 1997, 1999; Digby 2006; Dittmar 1991; Fenner 2016; Weedon 2016). This idea of anthropomorphism in the objects we find, discard or salvage is what archaeologists rely on in their work and findings. Camic (2010) looked at our attachment to material objects in a critical study, examining the aesthetic appeal and creative use of found objects in everyday life through grounded theory in a qualitative survey of 65 international participants. He found that most 'were able to reappraise the value of discarded objects from valueless (Thompson 2017) to something that had potential meaning and possible value to the finder' (Camic 2010, p.90). This significant study situates found objects in a model of human development into a network of interpersonal relationships. It has informed my understanding of how our subjectivity and sense of identity can be constructed. The significances of found objects and their import lies in how the viewer/finder perceives the objects in their object form, as well as the many associations and potential to evoke the personal and memories.

For art therapy trainee Michelle Baraba, the therapeutic potential in using found materials lies in finding a home for something that is lost which can be meaningful and resonate with aspects of herself. Using found objects as a medium has satisfied her need at a time at LASALLE College of the Arts that was captured in the dreamcatcher artwork formed out of wallpaper and a clear pebble she found at the College's studio. Baraba has this to say on her artwork and process (shown in Figure 1.2):

> Searching through the available wallpapers, I found a geometric pattern that felt soothing. The triangles were so small, so I had the idea to write something inside and using the pebble (another found object)

> to magnify the text, I wrote: you are important, a message which I really need to hear today. Usually I use bright colours (pink, purple, blue) when happy, so the use of earth tone signified my lower mood and it was a personal attempt at grounding. I used the element of play with the pebble to magnify the text and the bell to add an aspect of sound serving as a wake-up reminder of the message inside the pebble. (Personal communication, October 2019)

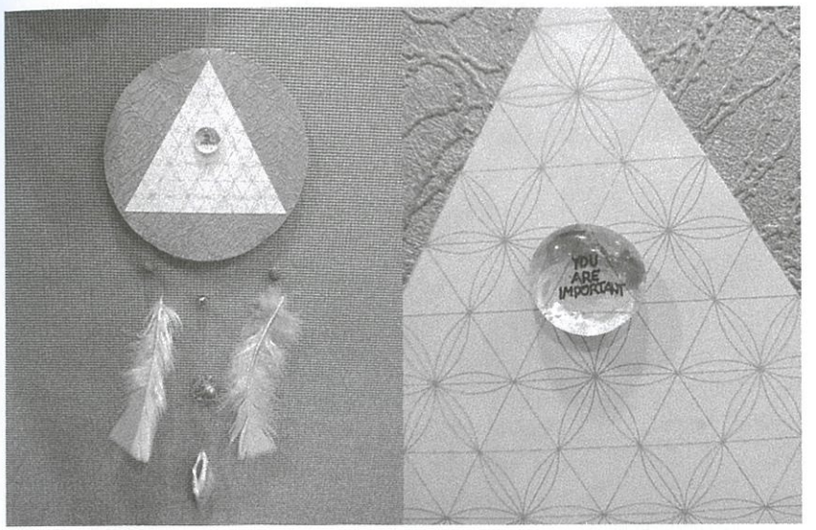

Figure 1.2. *You Are Important* [cardboard, wallpaper, thread, beads, magnifying pebbles, feathers, shell, 40cm x 15cm, Michelle Baraba, 2019]

Social memory and heritage

In 2010, relocation efforts for approximately 200 mostly elderly vendors and peddlers in Singapore's oldest and largest flea market were contested and unsuccessful. Although the market survived the Japanese Occupation and the wave of development following Singapore's independence, it had to make way for Singapore's urban renewal. Before the market was closed in July 2017, two Singaporean artists, Xi Jie Ng and Michelle Tan, bought 25 objects and re-presented them within their digital page (see Figure 1.3). The artists juxtaposed each object with 25 Singaporean politicians, and paired them with a personalized haiku, creating a space for a witty observation around our relations to tangible and intangible heritage and modernity.

Figure 1.3. *Funeral In 25 Objects* [screengrab from www.funeralin25objects.com, Xi Jie Ng and Michelle Tan]

By taking second-hand objects and subverting them within a social context, the wistful narratives and the witty interplay between 25 found objects and a haiku encourages conversations around the intangible and living heritage. It allows us to reflect on the funeral objects in their digital incarnation to ponder on our individual and collective relations with heritage, between nostalgia over preservation and Singapore's social memory, its values and urban culture street living. The flea market had been formed in the early years of Singapore in the 1930s, affectionately known as the *Thieves Market* and also a popular spot for the lower-income, local elderly and migrant workers. Its closure marked the last of 'street hawking' and spelled the loss of heritage and livelihood source for the older itinerant peddlers. Its closure is also an indictment of the mores of our capitalist society.

Therapeutic applications

The authors and artists surveyed variously posit that the use of found objects is an aesthetic encounter, with the subject reinterpreting the personhood. The searching, gathering and handling of found objects, human-made or natural, by the finder/subject can be an act of love, the rescue and elevation of something or an evacuation of memories otherwise overlooked. It can also be an act of aggression. By being found, feared or desired, the object can be creatively transformed by the viewer/artist through assemblages, collages, sculptures or digital art. The 'material cast-offs' are then 'transformed into objects with personal meaning and positive value through a process involving aesthetic judgments, cognitive reappraisal of rubbish, emotional arousal, and creative action' (Camic 2010, p.91).

Brooker (2010, p.34) has written on the 'therapeutic dimensions of found objects, the physical activity of going out and finding, identifying with and seeing parts of self in the surrounding environment and being able to attach to the outer world'. Dissanayake (1988) saw the many layers of artmaking as a means to make special sense of the world we live in. Looking for things and giving them meaning are in our human DNA, 'to differentiate between the ordinary and the more than ordinary' (p.104).

The collaborative and interaction process of discovery and cognitive reappraisal of found objects initiated by our clients can provide art

therapists with opportunities to engage clients through the creative process, integrating trauma care, loss and self-care in addressing issues such as grief and social isolation (Bat-Or and Megides 2016; Brooker 2010; Camic *et al.* 2011; Kalmanowitz and Lloyd 2011; Siano 2016; Solway *et al.* 2016; Whitaker 2013). We consciously or unconsciously assign meanings and significance to the objects to make sense of our attachment or loss. As art therapists, we can support and affirm the interactions and physical manipulation of found objects, the energy and vitality as our clients acted on the world, in their fabrication and altered material forms, which tells us something about the complex mesh-works of relations in which they lived (Ingold 2010).

Material potential and object play

I will now turn briefly to the tactile dimension of the found object and focus on the sensory, affective experience it affords. Here I find it useful to link materials and aesthetic processes to Tim Ingold's notion of 'material thinking'. The process that accompanies the discovery and inventiveness of seeing what we can make is reflective rather than determinate. The activity helps to integrate the divisions between various faculties and to overcome the mind's estrangement from the world. They provide openings into what Ingold called 'material intelligence' (Ingold 2012), and a way of coming into being. It is a form of knowledge that relates to the playful interactions: in the gestures, energy and movements occasioned by the handling of materials, as the artist/finder first circulates and then juxtaposes and assembles the different elements into assemblages, bricolages and collages.

Art therapists have assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that play has a particularly important role early in the lifespan. Play objects and object play in human evolution and innovation is 'both functional and adaptive', according to Bjorklund and Gardiner (2011, p.47). Play has long been considered a hallmark of a formative period and has an important role early in the lifespan. When given objects, children do not need to be told how to interact with them. Being natural 'fiddlers', 'tool users and makers', they play spontaneously and in the process discover the essential properties and inventiveness of things. It is not only 'the active manipulation of objects, such as banging them and throwing them, but also the use of objects to build something sometimes referred

to as constructive play' (Smilansky, cited in Bjorklund and Gardiner 2011, p.154).

Object play then involves playing with any type of building blocks or play or found materials that children can explore, sort, make or construct a model, pattern or something else out of. It is slightly different from 'pretend play' in that it is more concerned with the object's properties and what can be done with it rather than what it can represent. For art therapist Patcharin Sughondhabirom, objects need extra care:

> In our first meeting, the way the found objects present to my eyes, the way they catch my attention, those elements are important to me. Their delicate pieces/parts/remnants are to be in good care since they are representatives of the survivor. However, at the same time, the pieces also show us that they are not invincible, in fact, they are really vulnerable. Through time, they will decay and eventually will be gone. To capture these special moments and integrate them into the artwork, the found objects must be in good hands. (Personal communication, 10 March 2017)

In Chapter 14, I provide an account of my personal experience of creating a transitional object in *Astro 1.0* with found cardboard, fabric scraps, ribbons and yarn: 'As the artmaking activity unfolds, I become aware of the material's tactility and resistance, its sensory and emotional experiences, and its subsequent transformation and change (both external in the artwork and internally) in my psyche.' The creative action stimulates the free play of imagination, emotional arousal and mental activity. In concert, the three dimensions of imaginative play, material handling and cognitive functioning search for, and find, analogies and associations in my life experiences. Repetitive movements and the physical rhythms of binding, wrapping and stitching the body of *Astro 1.0* with ribbons and yarn can be painful but are also often pleasurable because they satisfy the mind's demand for coherence and security through the repetitive ritual.

Conclusion

The applications of what is considered junk, recycled or used can shape our understanding of non-art or non-traditional materials in art and therapy. We assemble objects in unexpected juxtapositions,

with various techniques and methods that disrupt and challenge the dominant narratives of rationality and discursive order. The discovery and transformation of found objects engages our attention, motivation, emotion and cognition, and provides us with a bridge to the outer world, facilitating psychological health (Camic 2010; Siano 2016). Found objects by their nature invite dialogue with the finder/artist/maker. Different objects in different combinations create stories of different nature. Through juxtaposition and coupling of objects, found objects could provide the opportunity for integration of personality and conflicts. The displacements, fetishization and the object's unexpected juxtaposition and transformation suggest metamorphosis.

Found objects are psychologically and metaphorically charged, dense with meanings. They trigger an action or chain of behaviours. They may speak to desire (erotic or pleasurable connections), memories, trauma or irreplaceable loss. In this relational network between found object, finder/subject and artist within the aesthetics encounters, the lost object is neither exclusively in the *objective*, in the found object's material world, nor in the subject's view, but in the intersubjective dynamic (Iverson 2007; Kelly 2013). Its importance lies in its inherent pleasure (haptic touch) and metaphorical potential (metaphors for the self), which reside in a complex intersection of personal, collective, social, cultural, historical and political dimensions.

The subject is located in the interactions and movement of the subject/finder in the encounter rather than the found art. It dwells in an interactive space that is knowable only through the physical entanglement with the materials of the world. In our actions with found objects, we find pleasure and meanings in rearranging them in groups to construct meaning or transform fragments in our coming to grips with the world. This human action (the handling and fiddling) and gesture is performative, for example to cut, tear, bind, stitch, glue, attach, wrap. The gesture and its material embodiment confer psychological meaning and emotional significance. Furthermore, the relation between these gestures and objects can extend our perception capabilities. It reveals the unconscious, and allows us to see what we do not normally see, to find the marvellous and promise in the work. All these elements of manipulating objects within the chance encounter and play, intersecting inquiry, surprise and biographical elements are all significant processes that can lead to creative transformation and growth.

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